



← [Supra-text Sequences](#)  
by Bev Braune

[An Interview with Jason Nelson](#) →  
by Cordite Poetry Review

## Adam Fieled Contextualists and Dissidents: Talking Gertrude Stein's Tender Buttons

1 December 2011



The world of literary critical discourse is governed by one central imperative: to expound. Every point must be developed, every quote “parsed”, every nuance and inflection (whether of tone, dialect, or syntax) “unpacked” to find a maximum density of critical material. This is an industry that thrives on complexity, with the assumed premise that (usually) great works of literary art (though “greatness” or “privilege” are now much debated, and do not hold the currency they once did) are “complex organisms”, in need of a specialist’s expert appraisal. Whether it is a Deconstructionist or a

Formalist reading, we can generally expect complex reactions and complex schematizations, and essential simplicity and simplistic reactions to be avoided like the plague.

How strange, then, to hear Paul Padgette make the following remark about Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* (TB) in the *New York Review of Books*: “You either get it or you don’t.” The breathtakingly blunt simplicity of this statement cuts right to the central critical crux that runs through the bulk of what has been written about TB; can it be criticized (as in, expounded upon) or can it not? Those that do engage in criticism of TB almost always do so within some contextual framework: Stein-as-Cubist, Stein-as-feminist, Stein-as-language manipulator. Others, like Padgette, are reduced by the extreme opacity of Stein’s text to a bare assertion that the text is too hermetic to be “parsed” in the normal way. It is interesting to note that the “dissidents” (as opposed to the “contextualists”) are often great fans of TB (as Padgette is), but evidently believe that the work either holds some “ineffable essence” or else must be read, first-hand, to be appreciated. That Stein’s fans (literary critics, no less), would lobby against critical discourse is a tribute both to the power and the singularity of her work.

The contextualists have a problem, too. Because TB is determinedly non-referential, any attempt at contextualization must also be rooted in an acknowledgment that the work is beyond a single contextual interpretation. As Christopher Knight noted in a 1991 article, “One can locate it in the long history of nonsense literature...in the French Cubist movement...in the Anglo-American tradition of literary modernism...and in that relatively new artistic order—the post-modern.” What is so baffling to literary critics is that, more often than not, one cannot “turn to the text” in order to verify these kinds of assertions. TB’s sense

### ESSAYS

#### Issue Launches. Submissions Windows.

Subscribe



#### 56.1: EKPHRATIC

(submit away!)

with Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington

#### 55: FUTURE MACHINES

(submit away!)

with Bella Li

#### 54: NO THEME V (coming soon!)

with Fiona Wight and Omar Sakr

#### 53.0: THE END

with Pam Brown

#### 52.0: TOIL

with Carol Jenkins

#### 51.1: UMAMI

with Luke Davies and *Lifted Brow*

#### 51.0: TRANSTASMAN

with Bonny Cassidy

#### 50.0: NO THEME IV

with John Tranter

#### 49.1: A BRITISH / IRISH

with Matthew Hall and Sophie Seita

#### 49.0: OBSOLETE

with Tracy Ryan

#### 48.1: CANADA

with Kent MacCarter and Shane Rhodes

#### 48.0: CONSTRAINT

with Corey Wakeling

#### 47.0: COLLABORATION

with Louis Armand and Helen Lambert

#### 46.1: MELBOURNE

with Michael Farrell

#### 46.0: NO THEME III

with Felicity Plunkett

#### 45.0: SILENCE

with Jan Owen

#### 44.0: GONDWANALAND

with Derek Motion

(or non-sense) is determined largely by who happens to be reading it; it is extreme enough to stymie but not as extreme as, say, Finnegans Wake, which by general consensus need only be touched by Joyce specialists. Simply put, there is enough sense in TB to make an attempt at locating it, but not enough so that any stated “location” could be feasible to large numbers of critics or readers. Thus, to this day, the pattern holds; dissidents argue against interpretation (and for first-hand experience), contextualists argue (with foreknowledge of “defeat”, in the sense that no contextual argument about TB in almost a century has seemed to “stick”) for a specialized interpretation. As Christopher Knight concludes, TB “embodies all... traditions even as it can be said never to be completely defined by any of them”.

The most influential writing about TB seeks to straddle the line between dissension and contextualization. Richard Bridgman’s *Gertrude Stein In Pieces*, more frequently cited than most Stein critical tomes, adopts something of a centrist stance. Bridgman makes clear that the ineffable quality of TB is not lost to him; the book is “all but impossible to transform adequately into normal exposition”(127) and “unusually resistant to interpretation”(125). Bridgman’s use of the word “transform” in this context is very relevant. Just as Stein’s language experiments transform conventional vernacular usage, so “normal exposition” would have to transform Stein’s language back into something resembling a normal vernacular. Bridgman’s work also points out the central critical dilemma surrounding TB; it is “all but impossible” to expound upon, but the “ineffable essence” that makes it so compelling also becomes a goad to try and expound nonetheless. “Adequately” also points to the manner in which TB turns literary critics back on themselves; critics are forced to confront the limitations of their own methodologies, criticize themselves and their own competence. Stein makes critics feel “inadequate”, and it seems likely that, were she here to see the bulk of TB criticism, this would have pleased her.

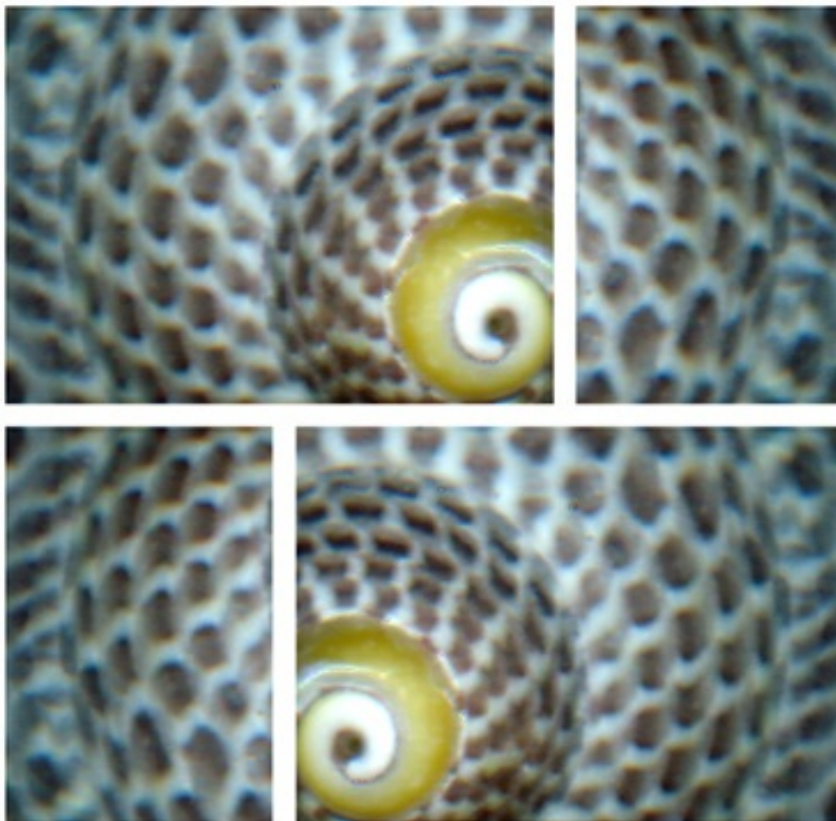


Image: Louise Molloy: ‘Shuttle’

Of those brave enough to “jump into the ring” with Stein, none does so with more

#### 43.1: PUMPKIN

with Kent MacCarter

#### 43.0: MASQUE

with Ann Vickery

#### 42.0: NO THEME II

with Gig Ryan

#### 41.1: RATBAGGERY

with Duncan Hose

#### 41.0: TRANSPACIFIC

with Josephine Rowe and Michael Nardone

#### 40.1: INDONESIA

with Kent MacCarter

#### 40.0: INTERLOCUTOR

with Libby Hart

#### 39.1: GIBBERBIRD

with Sarah Gory

#### 39.0: JACKPOT!

with Sam Wagan Watson

#### 38.0: SYDNEY

with Astrid Lorange

#### 37.1: NEBRASKA

with Sean Whalen

#### 37.0: NO THEME!

with Alan Weame

#### 36.0: ELECTRONICA

with Jill Jones

#### Recent Posts

- Caitlin Maling Reviews Alison Whittaker
- Review Short: Dennis Haskell’s *Ahead of Us*
- John Forbes’s ‘Miraculous Fluidity’
- Alice Whitmore on as Translations Editor
- Review Short: Gina Mercer’s *weaving nests with smoke and stone*
- Dominique Hecq Reviews *Charles Baudelaire: Selected Poems from Les Fleurs du Mal*
- BAY AREA Editorial
- 8 Collages by Sofie Ramos
- Wolves
- The Federal District
- History of Happiness
- from *Merry Hell*
- from *Profices*
- Web
- Repeating
- The Faraway (Les Effarés)
- My Teacup
- Errant, Thus Signifying (for Martín Ramírez, painter)
- Photographing Theater
- After England
- Tossing
- An Agatha, for Anne Boyer
- from *origin*
- from *We Are Nothing and So Can You*
- From The Compleat Purge: Volume I
- two excerpts from *INFRA, an afterword*
- Political Postscript

panache than Marjorie Perloff. Perloff's attack on the "locked semantic gates" of TB is multi-tiered and determinedly contextual. In "Of Objects and Readymades: Gertrude Stein and Marcel Duchamp", Perloff posits a space for Stein's experiment alongside Dada-ists Duchamp and Jean Arp, while also granting its unique nature and inscrutable texture. Though this texture seems interpretation-proof, when Stein, for instance, talks about a carafe ("A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange..."(3)), Perloff claims that "Stein's verbal dissection(s) give us the very essence of what we might call carafe-ness." For Perloff, Stein is not talking "around" objects, but using language to "dissect" them, in much the same way that Picasso and Braque dissected objects, using Cubist techniques to put them back together. Or, in the same manner Arp and Duchamp "dissected" the nature of works of art by presenting "readymades".

It would seem that Perloff's use of the word "dissection" would make a Cubist analogy more apropos than a Dada one. TB, however, is so much like a Rorschach blot that almost anything can be made to "fit", and the more perceptive contextualists, like Bridgman, realize this and foreground their assertions with a central disavowal. Perloff goes on to say, "to use words responsibly, Stein implies, is to become aware that no two words, no two morphemes or phonemes for that matter, are ever exactly the same." It could be stated, without too much hyperbole, that a discussion of literary "responsibility", as regards TB, is an extreme stretch. This leads to the major problem contextualists have in dealing with TB; no two of them seem able to agree about even the most general framework. Thus, reading contextual criticism about TB is like looking at snowflakes; no two contextual critics say the same thing, which makes "grouping" a problem and talking of a "majority" an impossibility.

Perloff saves her most provocative card for last; she says, "long before Derrida defined difference as both difference and deferral of meaning, Stein had expressed this profound recognition." This is a plausible interpretation, and it would seem likely that others might come to similar conclusions. However, this is not the case. Virgil Thomson takes the more centrist tack that "if (Stein's) simplifications occasionally approached incomprehensibility, this aim was less urgent...than opening up reality...for getting an inside view." Between Thomson and Perloff, we get opposite ends of the contextualist stance, as presented in criticism. From Perloff, we get definite, authoritatively presented analogies (Duchamp, Arp, Derrida) that seek to situate Stein and her work in a specific literary and aesthetic context. In fact, Perloff's approach is both more definite and more authoritative than the vast majority of approaches that have been made to TB. From Thomson, we get a very anti-authoritative sentiment, which leans towards an abject-seeming generality; Thomson talks of getting an "inside view" of reality, but he cannot commit to a single or singular definition of what this reality is. He does not join in with the dissidents who argue against critical interpretation and/or the ineffable quality of this text, and in fact somewhat boldly claims to surmise Stein's "aim"; yet, though the "why" is accounted for in his interpretation, the "what" is lightly brushed aside in a platitude. Considering that Thomson is writing, like Paul Padgett, in the prestigious New York Review of Books, it is remarkable that a plitudinous statement in this context seems par for the course. Few knew what to do with Stein and her work during her lifetime; it appears that little has changed.

#### WORKS CITED

Bridgman, Richard. *Gertrude Stein in Pieces*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970.

DeKoven, Marianne. *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein's*

Experimental Writing.

Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983.

Dubnick, Randa. *The Structure of Obscurity: Gertrude Stein, Language, and Cubism*.

Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984.

Gygax, Franziska. *Gender and Genre in Gertrude Stein*. London: Greenwood Press, 1998.

Knight, Christopher. "Gertrude Stein, Tender Buttons, and the Premises of Classicalism." *Modern Language Studies*, 21-3 (1991): 35-47.

Mitrone, Mena. "Linguistic Exoticism and Literary Alienation: Gertrude Stein's Tender Buttons." *Modern Language Studies*, 28-2 (1994): 87-102.

Perloff, Marjorie. "Of Objects and Readymades: Gertrude Stein and Marcel Duchamp." *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 23-2 (1996): 137-154.

Padgett, Paul. "Tender Buttons." *New York Review of Books*, 16-12 (1971).

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/10510>.

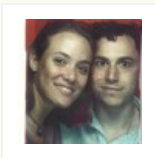
Ruddick, Lisa. *Reading Gertrude Stein*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.

Stein, Gertrude. *Tender Buttons*. New York: Dover Publications, 1997.

Thomson, Virgil. "A Very Difficult Author." *New York Review of Books*, 16-6 (1971).

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/10510>.

This entry was posted in [ESSAYS](#) and tagged [Adam Fieled](#), [gertrude stein](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).



#### About Adam Fieled

Adam Fieled is a poet based in Philadelphia. He has released five print books: "Opera Bufo" (Otoliths, 2007), "When You Bit..." (Otoliths, 2008), "Chimes" (Blazevox, 2009), "Apparition Poems" (Blazevox, 2010), and "Equations" (blue & yellow dog press, 2011), as well as e-books like "Beams" (Blazevox, 2007), "Disturb the Universe: The Collected Essays of Adam Fieled" (Argotist e-books, 2010), and "Mother Earth" (Argotist e-books, 2011). He has work in *Jacket*, *Cordite*, *Pennsound*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, the *Argotist*, *Great Works*, *Tears in the Fence*, *Upstairs at Duroc*, and in the *& Now Awards Anthology* from Lake Forest College Press. A magna cum laude graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, he also holds an MFA from New England College and an MA from Temple University.

#### Further reading:

[View all posts by Adam Fieled on Cordite →](#)

**Related Posts:**

- [Review Short: Astrid Lorange's \*How Reading is Written: a brief index to Gertrude Stein\*](#)

Please read [Cordite's comments policy](#) before joining the discussion.

Enter your comment here...

LAST POST

**Supra-text  
Sequences**

NEXT POST

**An Interview with  
Jason Nelson**



CITY OF LITERATURE



Australian Government



# PLUNDER AND SALVAGE

Michael Blackburn. Scribbler.

Search



[Home](#) [About](#) [Books](#) [Classics List](#) [Works Online](#)

Posted on [February 18, 2012](#)

[← Previous](#) [Next →](#)

## Gertie Stein's Tender Buttons: you either get it or you don't.

by Adam Fieled:



*The world of literary critical discourse is governed by one central imperative: to expound. Every point must be developed, every quote “parsed”, every nuance and inflection (whether of tone, dialect, or syntax) “unpacked” to find a maximum density of critical material. This is an industry that thrives on complexity, with the assumed premise that (usually) great works of literary art (though “greatness” or “privilege” are now much debated, and do not hold the currency they once did) are “complex organisms”, in need of a specialist’s expert appraisal. Whether it is a Deconstructionist or a Formalist reading, we can generally expect complex reactions and complex schematizations, and essential simplicity and simplistic reactions to be avoided like the plague.*

*How strange, then, to hear Paul Padgette make the following remark about Gertrude Stein’s Tender Buttons (TB) in the New York Review of Books: “You either get it or you don’t.” The breathtakingly blunt simplicity of this statement cuts right to the central critical crux that runs through the bulk of what has been written about TB; can it be criticized (as in, expounded upon) or can it not? Those that do engage in criticism of TB almost always do so within some contextual framework: Stein-as-Cubist, Stein-as-feminist, Stein-as-language manipulator. Others, like Padgette, are reduced by the extreme opacity of Stein’s text to a bare assertion that the text is too hermetic to be “parsed” in the normal way. It is interesting to note that the “dissidents” (as opposed to the “contextualists”) are often great fans of TB (as Padgette is), but evidently believe that the work either holds some “ineffable essence” or else must be read, first-hand, to be appreciated. That Stein’s fans (literary critics, no less), would lobby against critical discourse is a tribute both to the power and the singularity of her work.*

The contextualists have a problem, too. Because *TB* is determinedly non-referential, any attempt at contextualization must also be rooted in an acknowledgment that the work is beyond a single contextual interpretation. As Christopher Knight noted in a 1991 article, “One can locate it in the long history of nonsense literature...in the French Cubist movement...in the Anglo-American tradition of literary modernism...and in that relatively new artistic order—the post-modern.” What is so baffling to literary critics is that, more often than not, one cannot “turn to the text” in order to verify these kinds of assertions. *TB*’s sense (or non-sense) is determined largely by who happens to be reading it; it is extreme enough to stymie but not as extreme as, say, *Finnegan’s Wake*, which by general consensus need only be touched by Joyce specialists. Simply put, there is enough sense in *TB* to make an attempt at locating it, but not enough so that any stated “location” could be feasible to large numbers of critics or readers. Thus, to this day, the pattern holds; dissidents argue against interpretation (and for first-hand experience), contextualists argue (with foreknowledge of “defeat”, in the sense that no contextual argument about *TB* in almost a century has seemed to “stick”) for a specialized interpretation. As Christopher Knight concludes, *TB* “embodies all...traditions even as it can be said never to be completely defined by any of them”.

The most influential writing about *TB* seeks to straddle the line between dissension and contextualization. Richard Bridgman’s *Gertrude Stein In Pieces*, more frequently cited than most Stein critical tomes, adopts something of a centrist stance. Bridgman makes clear that the ineffable quality of *TB* is not lost to him; the book is “all but impossible to transform adequately into normal exposition”(127) and “unusually resistant to interpretation”(125). Bridgman’s use of the word “transform” in this context is very relevant. Just as Stein’s language experiments transform conventional vernacular usage, so “normal exposition” would have to transform Stein’s language back into something resembling a normal vernacular. Bridgman’s work also points out the central critical dilemma surrounding *TB*; it is “all but impossible” to expound upon, but the “ineffable essence” that makes it so compelling also becomes a goad to try and expound nonetheless. “Adequately” also points to the manner in which *TB* turns literary critics back on themselves; critics are forced to confront the limitations of their own methodologies, criticize themselves and their own competence. Stein makes critics feel “inadequate”, and it seems likely that, were she here to see the bulk of *TB* criticism, this would have pleased her.

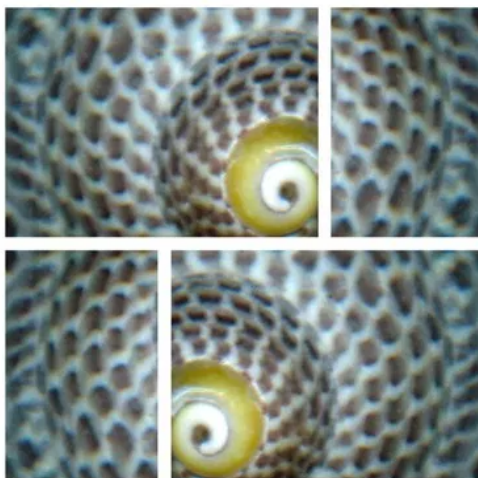


Image: Louise Molloy: ‘Shuttle’

Of those brave enough to “jump into the ring” with Stein, none does so with more panache than Marjorie Perloff. Perloff’s attack on the “locked semantic gates” of *TB* is multi-tiered and determinedly contextual. In “Of Objects and Readymades: Gertrude Stein and Marcel Duchamp”, Perloff posits a space for Stein’s experiment alongside Dada-ists Duchamp and Jean Arp, while also granting its unique nature and inscrutable texture. Though this texture seems interpretation-proof, when Stein, for instance, talks about a carafe (“A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange...”(3)), Perloff claims that “Stein’s verbal dissection(s) give us the very essence of what we might call carafe-ness.” For Perloff, Stein is not talking “around” objects, but using language to “dissect” them, in much the same way that Picasso and Braque dissected objects, using Cubist techniques to put them back together. Or, in the same manner Arp and Duchamp “dissected” the nature of works of art by presenting “readymades”.

It would seem that Perloff's use of the word "dissection" would make a Cubist analogy more apropos than a Dada one. TB, however, is so much like a Rorschach blot that almost anything can be made to "fit", and the more perceptive contextualists, like Bridgman, realize this and foreground their assertions with a central disavowal. Perloff goes on to say, "to use words responsibly, Stein implies, is to become aware that no two words, no two morphemes or phonemes for that matter, are ever exactly the same." It could be stated, without too much hyperbole, that a discussion of literary "responsibility", as regards TB, is an extreme stretch. This leads to the major problem contextualists have in dealing with TB; no two of them seem able to agree about even the most general framework. Thus, reading contextual criticism about TB is like looking at snowflakes; no two contextual critics say the same thing, which makes "grouping" a problem and talking of a "majority" an impossibility.

Perloff saves her most provocative card for last; she says, "long before Derrida defined difference as both difference and deferral of meaning, Stein had expressed this profound recognition." This is a plausible interpretation, and it would seem likely that others might come to similar conclusions. However, this is not the case. Virgil Thomson takes the more centrist tack that "if (Stein's) simplifications occasionally approached incomprehensibility, this aim was less urgent...than opening up reality...for getting an inside view." Between Thomson and Perloff, we get opposite ends of the contextualist stance, as presented in criticism. From Perloff, we get definite, authoritatively presented analogies (Duchamp, Arp, Derrida) that seek to situate Stein and her work in a specific literary and aesthetic context. In fact, Perloff's approach is both more definite and more authoritative than the vast majority of approaches that have been made to TB. From Thomson, we get a very anti-authoritative sentiment, which leans towards an abject-seeming generality; Thomson talks of getting an "inside view" of reality, but he cannot commit to a single or singular definition of what this reality is. He does not join in with the dissidents who argue against critical interpretation and/or the ineffable quality of this text, and in fact somewhat boldly claims to surmise Stein's "aim"; yet, though the "why" is accounted for in his interpretation, the "what" is lightly brushed aside in a platitude. Considering that Thomson is writing, like Paul Padgette, in the prestigious *New York Review of Books*, it is remarkable that a platitudinous statement in this context seems par for the course. Few knew what to do with Stein and her work during her lifetime; it appears that little has changed.

#### WORKS CITED

Bridgman, Richard. *Gertrude Stein in Pieces*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970.

DeKoven, Marianne. *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein's Experimental Writing*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983.

Dubnick, Randa. *The Structure of Obscurity: Gertrude Stein, Language, and Cubism*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984.

Gygax, Franziska. *Gender and Genre in Gertrude Stein*. London: Greenwood Press, 1998.

Knight, Christopher. "Gertrude Stein, Tender Buttons, and the Premises of Classicalism." *Modern Language Studies*, 21-3 (1991): 35-47.

Mitrone, Mena. "Linguistic Exoticism and Literary Alienation: Gertrude Stein's Tender Buttons." *Modern Language Studies*, 28-2 (1994): 87-102.

Perloff, Marjorie. "Of Objects and Readymades: Gertrude Stein and Marcel Duchamp." *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 23-2 (1996): 137-154.

Padgette, Paul. "Tender Buttons." *New York Review of Books*, 16-12 (1971).  
<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/10510>.

Ruddick, Lisa. *Reading Gertrude Stein*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.

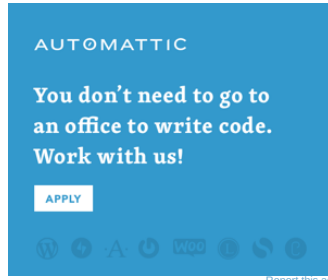


Stein, Gertrude. *Tender Buttons*. New York: Dover Publications, 1997.

Thomson, Virgil. "A Very Difficult Author." *New York Review of Books*, 16-6 (1971).  
<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/10510>.

via [cordite.org.au](http://cordite.org.au)

Advertisements



AUTOMATTIC

You don't need to go to an office to write code. Work with us!

APPLY

WordPress, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, RSS, Dribbble, SoundCloud, GitHub, and other social media icons.

[Report this ad](#)



AUTOMATTIC

```
<?php find_developers( [
  'language' => PHP,
  'specialty' => SCALING,
  'location' => ANYWHERE,
] )
```

APPLY

WordPress, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, RSS, Dribbble, SoundCloud, GitHub, and other social media icons.

[Report this ad](#)

SHARE THIS:

Twitter Facebook Tumblr G+ Google Email Print

★ Like

Be the first to like this.

This entry was posted in [Uncategorized](#) by [Adestrop](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

## Leave a Reply

Enter your comment here...

Create a free website or blog at WordPress.com.